The Shaws of Midnapore

Since 1883 there have been Shaws in Midnapore. That was before there was any Midnapore. There was just a small stream called Fish Creek crossed by a prairie trail, a few miles south of the little cow town of Calgary. Then one fine day in May 1883, 5 span of oxen, each span hauling a great loaded wagon pulled into a little flat in the creek bottom and halted there.

A family had arrived. They had crossed an ocean and a continent and now in this great new land, the rich, untrodden West they were going to build a home.

Mr. and Mrs. S.W. Shaw had left a patrician house of culture and refinement in England to pioneer in Alberta because they felt that this land of opportunity would give their children and their children's children a living and a home. It did.

When they left England they were really headed for the Peace River country. However Peace River or Fish Creek, either was just a name, and a name which spelled the unknown, so these adventureres planned to be prepared for any eventuality.

In England they bought a large assortment of equipment which they felt they might need. This included a woollen mill, comprising 30 tons of machinery, some leather and a set of shoe-making tools and equipment for home photography.

In Winnipeg, the stepping-off point for the West, they added some more ordinary but extremely essential items. Then, with food supplies deemed sufficient for two years (this included 1 ton of flour), 10 oxen, several cows, sheep, geese, chickens, grain, farm implements, and other sundries they boarded the train once more.

This took them to the end of the constructed line, which then, in the spring of 1883, was Swift Current. At this point, which was merely a siding on the open prairie, they with all their supplies and belongings, were set down and left to shift for themselves. Right here that pioneering spirit of resourcefulness and fortitude displayed itself and the family set to work to assemble and load the wagons and get all in readiness for the long trek westward. One wagon was fitted up in the canvas-covered prairie schooner style to provide some shelter for the travellers against the sun and the rain and the frost during the days that followed.

Then of course Nature showed her hand in one or two ways to test the newcomers. For example a whirlwind or cyclone came up, bowled off a wagon which unfortunately stood in its path, upsetting precious goods, and leaving the vehicle in a rakish stance with its tongue sunk deep in the prairie sod. That was just one of those little things and before long, the wagon was repaired and reloaded, the tents in which the family had been living were

packed and the caravan set forth.

Travel was slow but it was steady, as was the case with oxen. The animals which were led and the heavier implements which were dragged behind the wagons also made the going slow.

Usually from fifteen to twenty miles a day were covered.

After slightly over a month's travel Calgary was reached. The wagons arrived a short time before the line of steel which had been spanning the prairie at about the same rate. The Elbow River was in flood and this occasioned a delay until the wagons could be ferried across it.

Calgary at this time was just a tiny settlement, the focus of which was the police barracks and the Hudsons' Bay Co. store. The I.G.Baker store, well known to all Oldtimers was also in existence then.

As the newcomers pulled into the little settlement the whitening bones of hundreds of cattle presented mute evidence that the country they were about to adopt could be hard and cruel as well as bountiful and attractive.

They were told the whole sad story. The winter of 1882 had been a hard and treacherous one. A heavy snowfall in September was followed by a short -lived October Chinook. Then came an icy blast from the North which froze an impenetrable crust of ice on the snow. And it was this ice-bound range which spelled death for 8000 head of cattle belonging to the Cochrane Ranch

This ranch was located west of Calgary just South of the Bow at Shagganappe Point and many of the starving cattle in their search for food ranged through the town, sheltering against the buildings and grubbing in the yards.

After a few days spent in Calgary, the caravan rolled forth again, headed towards the south. This time the journey was not long. Eight or nine miles travel brought the party to Fish Creek. Somehow this location had a special appeal and Mr. and Mrs. Shaw decided that this was the place for which they had been searching. Here they would build their home.

What a task that must have been. It was starting from scratch with a vengeance. First logs had to be located-- there were no big trees on Fish Creek then, in fact there was not nearly as much tree and bush growth in the Foothill area then as there is now. The nearest logs suitable for building were miles West where Priddis now is. These had to be cut and hauled with oxen. Then, slowly the walls began to rise. For a good many years a sod roof provided shelter against the elements. Furniture gradually took form, at first logs served as tables and chairs. The contrast between this primitive shack and the beautifully well-staffed Kentish home of former years might have overwhelmed a less indomitable spirit but it left Mrs. Shaw undaunted. So also did the hard and continuous labour which faced her.

That busy spring also saw the breaking up and planting of a few acres of land.

The crop was garnered and the house was ready before the first winter arrived which happily came late and was one of th those delightful, open winters with which southern Alberta is sometimes blessed.

While the building was in progress the family lived in a large marquee which the forethought that characterized the whole expedition had provided. This was partitioned off with blankets into different rooms. The kitchen part was fitted up with a range purchased from Ashdown's in Winnipeg. The outside kitchen idea proved so satisfactory that it was carried on in fine weather during the summers that followed.

Then in the spring of 1885 the rivers flooded. Even Fish Creek, ordinarily a little stream, brimmed its banks and spread out all over the valley one-half a mile in width. The new house was flooded and so was the tent, serving as a summer kitchen The latter remained securely fastened to its moorings but much of its contents was carried away. Tubs, chairs, tables, poultry and other sundries, even the precious cook stove floated away on the tide.

Three times that spring those inundating waters rose and when they eventually receded a great expanse of mud was revealed. Thick layers of silt covered all and sundry. The precious woollen mill machinery which had been left behind in Winnipeg and the shipped up when the railroad obligingly ran right through the holding lay deep in the sticky mud.

Excavations followed and before long the three car loads of machinery and equipment were brought to light once more. Many of the household articles were also recovered out of the sand and silt. Even the stove was found away down the creek.

To prevent a reoccurrence of this watery invasion the Shaw family promptly moved their house and home to higher land, an unecessary effort as history proved, because to this day Fish Creek has never again risen to the height of their first location.

Perhaps it was fortunate that the all-engrossing business of those first few years left Mrs. Shaw no time for the loneliness which might have been her lot as the only white woman in the district. When the family first pitched their tent as squatters, there was just one other settler, that famous old prospector, John Glen. He had already taken up a farm and was making a living by growing vegetables and oats which he sold to the Mounted Police in Calgary.

At this time the land had been surveyed into townships but not into sections. When two years later the work of surveying was completed and the land was for sale, Mr. Shaw purchased two sections.

This original farm is still Shaw property.

Life in those early days was shorn of the trappings of civilization and people were occupied merely with living. There was little money to be made and little use for it. Business was done mostly by barter, which was rather a good thing thing when flour cost $25.00 a sack.

The Shaw family grew quantities of vegetables during those first years and hauled them into Calgary with any other produce they had. At first the trusty oxen were used for this purpose but later the acquisition of a team of horses brought the family right up to date where transportation was concerned.

The woollen mill, when it was erected, gave the district considerable fame and importance. It was operated by the family for 20 years, producing the finest quality of blankets cloth and woollen goods. Many of these blankets have done service in the Shaw family and other old time families in the district ever since, and are in use and in good condition to-day.

The mill was sold in 1905 but was later repossessed. Unfortunately it was burned down in 1915. At this time it was not operating but was used for the storing of grain and other commodities.

The year 1885 appeared to be a full and rather memorable one in the life of the Midnapore district, as indeed it was in the life of the whole West. The Rebellion did'nt touch the residents of Calgary and surrounding country very closely, although there was some fear that Calgary might be raided. However the Indians on the SarceeReserveappeared to have faith in their agent, and did'nt do anything more than cause a certain amount of consternation and uneasiness by riding into Calgary and taking what they wanted from the stores without bothering about that customary little procedure of paying for them.

It was in this year of rebellion that the eldest son of the Shaw family, Hugh, then a boy of 13, drove a team and wagon on a freighting job between Calgary and Edmonton.

In the same year, 1885, it was decided that, as the community had passed beyond it's infancy, it warranted a church. John Glen, although a Roman Catholic, donated enough land to accomodate a church and cemetery for the Protestant settlers. So St. Pauls,a replica in miniature of the first Pro-Cathedral of the Redeemer in Calgary, was built. The first incumbent, the Rev. E. Paske Smith, himself a carpenter of ability, helped the settlers with it's construction. For quite a number of years the clergyman lived half-way between Calgary and Midnapore, for these two points were much of a size then and needed equal attention.

The cemetery in Midnapore was consecrated before there was ~~xxxAnglixxx~~ a Protestant cemetery in Calgary so many of the first Protestant Calgarians to go to their long rest were buried in Midnapore.

Now the tiny church of St. Pauls continues to serve it's people and has the distinction of being the oldest Anglician church still in use in Southern Alberta.

1885 also saw the erection of the first school house. The intention was to build it in the corner just across the road south of the church, but by the time the lumber arrived that particular spot was occupied by a slough. The slough was not permanent however and about fifteen years later Mr. and Mrs. Shaw constructed a fine big home with lovely surrounding gardens in the same location. But at the time the school was shifted alittle farther south. It was built chiefly by Mr. Shaw and his elder sons and the first pupils consisted of the younger Shaw children, the children of John Glen and a few Indian boys and girls. The teacher at this time was the eldest Miss Shaw, who later became Mrs. M. T. Millar of Millarville. Before the school was completed, classes were held for a short time in the newly constructed church.

That old school still stands and fulfills a different purpose in life, that of holding grain and serving as a haven for pigeons. It is flanked on each side, at reasonable distances, by modern homes owned by Jimmy and Bill Shaw, grandsons of those two far-seeing trail-blazers.

Then there was the Post Office. The handling of this fell also to Mr. Shaw and in the following manner. Not long after he homesteaded on Fish Creek the driver of the old stage coach from Calgary to Macleodhanded him some mail bags and told him he would really have to attend to this matter because he was the only man in the vicinity who could read and write, He accepted the responsibility so unceremoniously thrust upon him, was officially appointed later and served in this capacity until his death thirty-seven years afterwards.

The making and installing of a phone, the first in Midnapore, was another ambitious project which the Shaws attempted and carried out. This was before the Bell Company did any operating in the village.

The first store in Midnapore was also run by the Shaw family. At first there was merely a stock of goods in a room of the house but later a store was built across the road west of the church. Mr. Shaw attended to this business at first but later Mrs. Shaw took it over. She operated it for several years and then rented it as a store until her death in 1940.

Fortune smiled on the Shaws and success attended most of their ventures. But like all pioneers they had to take the bad with the good. For example a period of seven dry years came shortly after the family had acquired additional land. The lack of moisture became very serious. Red Deer Lake dried up, in fact some hay was cut on the middle portions of it. There were no crops. The result was that this hard-gotten land had to be given up. However later more land was bought from the C. P.R.

Another time the Shaws bought 150 head of Shorthorns. Not having enough pasture they rented the Bradfield Ranch at Millarville. But the rent was high and the price of cattle dropped, so such numbers of cattle had to be sold to pay the rent that after a few years there were no Shorthorns left.

During those years of swift passage and swifter change Mrs. Shaw and her family took an active part in the social as well as the business life of the little community. For many years the Shaw home was a sort of half-way house between Calgary and the ranch lands of the south . It was quite the customary thing for travellers to "put up their horses and stop the night". The number of people who did so was quite unimportant, because when all the bedroom space was taken up those who were left could roll up in their blankets and sleep on the kitchen floor.

Mrs. Shaw for many years was keenly interested in the Oldtimers' Association and served as past president of the Women's Section. During the last few years her familiar figure has been sorely missed at the Oldtimer's functions.

Not long before her death she stated that she had never regretted coming to Alberta. During her years she saw and lived a variety of lives, "not least but honored of them all". And she died content.

The family which arrived in Fish Creek as children grew up with the community and made their several ways and now their children and grandchildren are doing the same. Mrs. M.T.Miller lived out her full span of years at Millarville, Mrs.F.Gough was one of Okotoks' best loved residents. Mrs. R.C.Thomas is still an active figure in Calgary and Mrs. R.Goodall lives at Coronation. Of the sons, York lives in Calgary, and Hugh and Maltman are still in Midnapore.

In this way the growth and development of the village of Midnapore and the surrounding country has been intrinsically bound and interwoven with the work and activities of the Shaw family. It still is. And Shaws are still numerous in Midnapore. Members of the family are characterized chiefly by their heads-cool and clear thinking in a deal, hot and quick in an argument and generally thatched with shining red.